

Byzantium confronts its neighbours: Islam and the crusaders in the twelfth century

John France

Swansea University

The fall of the Byzantine empire at the end of the twelfth century and the debacle of 1204 had complex causes, most of which are far beyond the scope of a short paper. However, it is very evident that military failure was a powerful element in the Byzantine collapse. The enquiry that follows seeks to establish the reasons for this failure by examining the nature of the empire's armies and the events of particular campaigns. It is evident that sweeping generalizations about military failure need considerable qualification and that the outcome of individual expeditions was influenced by particular circumstances. Yet it does appear that it is possible to see certain general factors at work undermining, or at least limiting, the military efforts of Byzantium.

In one key respect Byzantium was quite different from its two eastern neighbours. The Turks and those whom they had brought with them, Kurds, Circassians etc, were alien peoples in the Middle East, so alien indeed that they built citadels to control the native peoples of cities like Aleppo and Damascus.¹ Some of the Arab peoples of the area saw in the First Crusade an opportunity to throw off their alien rule and this undoubtedly helped the westerners to establish themselves.² But in the twelfth century the Turkish elite came to embody Islam in the Middle East, partly by a limited assimilation to Arab culture and, more importantly, by developing *jihad* as a means of solidifying their alien rule and uniting behind them the Sunni of their lands against Christian powers and Shi'ite heretics alike.³ As for the Latin settlers in the East, their very presence was predicated on an ideological imperative and this powerfully influenced western powers in their attitude to

1 S. Berthier, ‘La citadelle de Damas: les apports d'une étude archéologique’, in H. Kennedy (ed.), *Muslim military architecture in Greater Syria* (Leiden 2006) 151–64. For Arab perceptions of alien peoples, including Franks and steppe people, see A. Al-Azmeh, ‘Barbarians in Arab eyes’, *Past and Present* 134 (1992) 3–18, especially 11–12.

2 This is touched upon by T. el-Azheri, *The Saljuqs of Syria during the crusades* (Berlin 1997), and examined closely by N. Morton and J. France, ‘Arab Muslim reactions to Turkish authority in northern Syria, 1085–1128’ (forthcoming).

3 M.C. Lyons and D. E. P. Jackson, *Saladin: the politics of Holy War* (Cambridge 1979).

Mediterranean affairs.⁴ This does not mean that the attitudes and policies of the Latins or the Islamic powers were always dominated by ideological considerations; indeed, far from it, for both sides were highly pragmatic when their interests were at stake. However, both could call upon a core ideology that promised spiritual rewards to reinforce their fighting capacity and neither could entirely ignore this in their diplomacy. By contrast, the Byzantine Church was resolutely opposed to the offer of any such benefit to its soldiers, even though defence of the empire was acknowledged as a sacred cause.⁵ I will return to the subject of motivation, pausing here only to note that in practice this meant that the Byzantine army's purpose was to uphold the current regime, and that this had considerable implications in times of instability and what we have all learned in recent years to call regime change.

The First Crusade was fundamentally the result of an appeal for help from the emperor Alexios Komnenos (1081–1118) which was received by the pope at the Council of Piacenza in 1095.⁶ It is worth considering why this appeal was launched. There can be little doubt that it was prompted by the outbreak of a savage succession struggle in the Seljuk house after the death of Malik Shah in 1092 which offered opportunities for reversing the Turkish conquest of Anatolia since 1071.⁷ It is usually argued that, having lost his Anatolian recruiting grounds, Alexios was short of troops, and knew that they were available in the West. Indeed, Robert the Frisian, count of Flanders, had sent 500 knights to serve the emperor. Anna Komnene refers to him no less than three times.⁸ The emperor would presumably have known also of the appeal of his predecessor, Michael VII Doukas (1071–78), to pope Gregory VII (1073–85) for troops to fight the Turkish invasion of Anatolia, though perhaps he did not know of that pope's ambitious ideas. Gregory was ready to offer military aid in return for the obedience of the Greek Church, an idea which runs like a thread through crusading history. He also proposed to lead a military expedition which would not merely aid the Christians of the east but also liberate Jerusalem.⁹ The major problem about an appeal for troops is to understand why it was needed. After all, dressed up as it undoubtedly was in both cases, it was an

4 J. Phillips, *Defenders of the Holy Land: relations between the Latin East and the West, 1119–1187* (Oxford 1996).

5 P. Viscuso, 'Christian participation in warfare: a Byzantine view', and J.A. Munitiz, 'War and peace reflected in some Byzantine *Mirrors of Princes*', in T.S. Miller and J. Nesbitt (eds), *Peace and war in Byzantium: Essays in honor of George T. Dennis S.J.* (Washington, D. C. 1995) 33–40, 50–61.

6 Bernold of St Blaise, *Chronicon*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica SS 5:462; Ekkehard of Aura, *Chronicon Universale*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica SS 6: 213.

7 Useful surveys of the Seljuk break-up can be found in P.M. Holt, *The age of the crusades. The Near East from the eleventh century to 1517* (London 1986) and, with more detail, in El-Azheri, *Saljuqs of Syria*, 60–114.

8 *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, ed. D. R. Reinsch and A. Kambylis (Berlin and New York 2001) 7.6.1 (p. 218), 7.8.2–3 (pp. 223–24), 8.8.3 (p. 223); trans. E. R. A. Sewter (Harmondsworth 1969) 229, 232, 252.

9 H. E. J. Cowdrey, (ed.), *The register of Pope Gregory VII 1073–85* (Oxford 2002) 50–1, 54–5, 122–4; E. Emerton, (ed.), *The correspondence of Pope Gregory VII: selected letters from the Registrum* (New York 1932) 22, 25, 56; H. E. J. Cowdrey, 'Pope Gregory VII's "crusading" plans of 1074', in B. Z. Kedar,

admission of weakness and quite contrary to imperial ideology, especially when addressed to the pope. All authorities agree that Alexios, whose appeal was successful, was creating a new situation by admitting westerners into the imperial arena, and he can hardly have been ignorant that his act had no precedent.

Moreover, why did he need troops? It was very evident that in the infighting after Manzikert the old imperial army had been almost destroyed, though John Haldon has suggested that there was at least a degree of continuity deep into the twelfth century.¹⁰ Even so, all authorities agree that the Byzantine army of the eleventh century was dominated by mercenaries, some native and many foreign, and that before 1071 this force had been very effective. Indeed, as late as 1078 substantial forces clashed at Kalavryai and demonstrated a remarkable degree of discipline and military ardour.¹¹ One of the advantages of a mercenary army is that it can be created quickly, and one would have thought Alexios could find suitable soldiers, especially by 1095, from a number of sources. If his eyes were fixed on Anatolia, his counter to the Turkish horse archers was obvious – the Patzinaks, Cumans and Turks whom we find in his service in large numbers by the time of the First Crusade. Alexios had had some bad moments in a military sense but by 1095 he had weathered them without making a major appeal for help. This suggests that his intentions by that date were really very ambitious if the forces that had held off the Sicilians and the Patzinaks were insufficient. In fact the question of the intentions and military ambitions of the Comnenian dynasty is contested.

There has been a long-standing belief that Alexios and his immediate successors John (1118–43) and Manuel (1143–80) only intended to reassert their control over the richer peripheral areas of Anatolia and were content to leave the plateau to the Turks.¹² A recent study of the Comnenian army suggests the same, though with the proviso that perhaps less limited objectives were remotely envisaged.¹³ This idea seems to spring from looking at the Komnenoi from a crusading perspective which focuses attention on the Antioch campaigns. In general terms such a policy makes absolutely no sense at all because inner Anatolia offers easy access down to the coastal areas and, in fact, in the twelfth century the empire found it very difficult to defend these in the absence of control over the plateau. On the Second Crusade Odo of Deuil shrewdly observed that ‘..all Romania was formerly under Greek jurisdiction, the Turks now possess a great part after expelling the Greeks, have devastated another part; but

Continued

H. E. Mayer, R. C. Smail (eds.), *Outremer: studies in the history of the crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem presented to Joshua Prawer* (Jerusalem 1982) 27–40.

10 J. Haldon, *Warfare, state, and society in the Byzantine world, 565–1204* (London 1999) 116–19.

11 W. Treadgold, *Byzantium and its army 284–1081* (Stanford 1995) 218; J. Haldon, *The Byzantine wars: battles and campaigns of the Byzantine era* (Stroud 2001) 127–33.

12 A fairly recent example is offered by Javier Faci Lacasta, ‘El imperio bizantino y la Primera Cruzada’, in L. García-Guijarro Ramos (ed.), *La Primera Cruzada, novecientos años después: el concilio de Clermont y los orígenes del movimiento cruzado* (Madrid 1997) 109–18.

13 J.W. Birkenmeier, *The development of the Komnenian army: 1081–1180* (Leiden 2002) 47.

where the Greeks still hold castles, the two peoples divide the revenues.¹⁴ In fact there is good reason to think that even before the First Crusade Alexios had considerable ambitions. Margaret Mullett, basing her work on letters of Theophylact of Ochrid, has shown that there is contemporary evidence of Alexios' intention to reconquer Anatolia as early as 1092.¹⁵ Alexios' strategy in the wake of the First Crusade speaks heavily against any limited objective. A naval and military expedition, led by his brother-in-law, John Doukas, picked off the emirate of Smyrna which had been isolated by the crusader victories over the Seljuks of Nicaea, before penetrating the Maeander valley and marching as far as Polybotos (modern Bolvadin). Alexios himself then came south from Nicaea to join forces with them at Philomelion (modern Akşehir) in late June 1098. Ahead of them lay a string of cities seized by the crusaders who had left garrisons in them, the most important being Iconium (modern Konya) and Caesarea-in-Cappadocia (modern Kayseri). At Philomelion Alexios met Stephen of Blois who had fled from the siege of Antioch and told him the crusader army was besieged by Kerbogah's huge army and was doomed, while from other sources it seemed likely that another Turkish army was in the field to the north. In the light of this information Alexios evacuated the local Christian population, devastated the land, and withdrew.¹⁶ My own view is that Alexios was prepared to help the crusaders as long as they were successful but was not prepared to take any risks on their behalf; this is certainly not an argument for limited ambitions.¹⁷ Indeed, in 1116 Alexios himself mounted another expedition, apparently aimed against Iconium, and although he again reached Philomelion he was driven back.¹⁸ His son John campaigned in Anatolia in 1119, 1124, 1132–34 and again in 1139 after his attack on Cilicia and Antioch.¹⁹ His successor, Manuel, mounted a major expedition against Iconium in 1146, actually reaching the city itself, and mobilized a huge army in 1160 whose very presence forced a peace.²⁰ In 1176 he made the all-out attempt to destroy Iconium that ended in disaster at Myriokephalon.²¹ Whatever such campaigns lacked it was certainly not ambition.

14 Odo of Deuil, *The Journey of Louis VII to the East*, ed. and trans. V.G. Berry (New York 1948) 88–9.

15 M. Mullett, '1098 and all that: Theophylact, the bishop of Semnea and the Alexian reconquest of Anatolia', *Peritia* 10 (1997) 237–52 and 'The imperial vocabulary of Alexios I Komnenos', in M. Mullett and D. Smythe (eds.), *Alexios I Komnenos*, I, Papers (Belfast 1996) 359–97; see also her *Theophylact of Ochrid: reading the letters of a Byzantine archbishop*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs, 2 (Aldershot 1997).

16 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, eds. Reisch and Kambylis, 11.6.1–9 (pp. 338–42); trans. Sewter, 345–9; Mullett, 'Alexian reconquest', 251–2, thinks that Philomelion marked the failure of Alexios' ambitions, and that this explains the silence of the sources on his intentions.

17 J. France, *Victory in the East: a military history of the First Crusade* (Cambridge 1994) 299–303.

18 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, ed. Reisch and Kambylis, 15.1–7 (pp. 461–85); trans. Sewter, 471–92.

19 *Ioannis Cinnami Epitome*, ed. A. Meineke (Bonn 1836) 3–8, 9–10, 13–17; *Deeds of John and Manuel Comnenus*, trans. C. M. Brand, Columbia Records of Civilization (New York 1976) 14–16, 17, 20–2, 25–6.

20 Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 38–67, 199–201; trans. Brand, 38–58, 151–2.

21 Nicetae Choniatae *Historia*, ed. J.-L. van Dieten (Berlin and New York 1975) 175–88; O City of Byzantium! trans. H. J. Magoulias (Detroit 1984) 99–106.

A much more sophisticated interpretation of the objectives of Manuel is offered by Magdalino. He sees the emperor as playing off his enemies – the Sicilian rebels against the Guiscardians and the papacy against Barbarossa. The Hungarians, Vlachs and Serbs, once defeated, provide soldiers against eastern enemies, while the sultan of Iconium is played off against the Danishmend and, ultimately, Nur-ed-Din in Syria against whom the crusaders are also enlisted. It is a fine picture of chess-board diplomacy with Manuel as a kind of universal spider shuffling the pieces about.²² In places this analysis is brilliant and it conforms to long-standing Byzantine practice but it is, perhaps, rather too neat a pattern. I cannot help thinking that Manuel was much more opportunistic, and the extraordinary expedition to Norman south Italy, to which Kinnamos devotes so much space, seems to have sprung from a determination to exploit the momentary weakness of that realm.²³ Choniates also gives this matter much attention, most of it to inform us what a disaster it was, and he reflected bitterly on the expense and its uselessness.²⁴ Jonathan Harris has a rather different focus, because he is writing about Byzantium and the crusades. He is not opposed to Magdalino's analysis but emphasizes that Alexios, John and Manuel were all primarily concerned to assert imperial hegemony, deeply offended by the crusade's emergence as a threat to their headship of the *oikoumene*, rather than to seek real control over Antioch. The empire, he argues, was less concerned with possession of land than with the recognition of its universalist claims.²⁵ Lilie, however, argues to the contrary and follows Kinnamos' suggestion that John Komnenos was determined to establish a Byzantine principality for his son, Manuel, with authority over Cilicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Manuel, he suggests, had similar ambitions, but was ultimately forced to modify them, recognizing suzerainty over Antioch because of his need to pursue a policy of *détente* with the West in general and the papacy in particular.²⁶

These are all interesting and important views on Byzantine policy but they do not really rest on any analysis of the real currency of power in the twelfth century, that of military strength. The army of the Comnenian emperors has been the subject of a recent study with its own reflections on imperial intentions and I am certainly impressed by many of its conclusions.²⁷ What I would add is that military strength is always relative to that of enemies. It is not an absolute. A weak power can conquer a weaker one, only to be exposed when a major power with a great army enters the fray. The Khwarezmians seemed like giants of the southern steppe until they defied Chinggis Khan in 1219–20.²⁸

The picture of the Byzantine army in the mid-twelfth century which emerges from modern studies is of a numerous and formidable force, at least by the end of the reign

22 P. Magdalino, *The empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–80* (Cambridge 1993) 27–108.

23 Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 136–70; trans. Brand, 107–30.

24 Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 96–100; trans. Magoulias, 55–8.

25 J. Harris, *Byzantium and the crusades* (London 2003) 80–92, 105–8.

26 Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 15–22; trans. Brand, 21–6; R.J. Lilie, *Byzantium and the crusades* (Oxford 1994) 138–41, 176–83 (Eng. trans. of *Byzanz und die Kreuzfahrstaaten* [Munich 1981]).

27 Birkenmeier, *Komnenian army*.

28 J. France, *The crusades and the expansion of Catholic Christendom 1000–1714* (London 2005) 192.

of Alexios. There is general agreement that the army defeated at Myriokephalon in 1176 was of the order of 30000 and well equipped with a powerful siege-train.²⁹ This could not have been the whole Byzantine military force because vulnerable frontiers in the Balkans and elsewhere in Anatolia would have needed garrisons. However, by medieval standards this was an immense army to put into the field, and on the face of it identifies the empire as a great power. However, we should be wary of judging by exceptional events, as this clearly was. The signs are that Manuel wanted to capture Iconium and destroy this Turkish sultanate. Medieval states were capable of creating large forces on occasion. One of the largest western armies we know of in the twelfth century was that mounted by the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem against Saladin at Hattin in 1187. This numbered about 18–20000 but it seems to have represented a total mobilization because, after its defeat, the kingdom was defenceless.³⁰ Consistently sustaining substantial forces is a quite different matter and European armies were rarely much bigger than about 5000. William the Conqueror mustered 7000 for his conquest of England and Robert Guiscard took perhaps 15000 in his effort in 1081–85 to conquer the Byzantine empire.³¹ These were, however, very special efforts. Henry II of England, although renowned as a soldier, rarely raised as many as 5000 in a single force. In 1214 the fate of Europe was decided at Bouvines but only about 17000 were present, split roughly equally between the two armies.³²

However, this could not have been the whole Byzantine army because Manuel was painfully aware of leaving enemies to the west and in the Balkans, while the cities of Anatolia could not have been absolutely bereft. In fact the Byzantine frontier in Anatolia was very long and vulnerable. In the mid-Byzantine period the thematic system had provided soldiers who may not have been excellent but who were capable of defending strong-points and harassing the Arab invaders. In the 1120s Constantine Gabras held Trebizond and his regime must have been sustained by local forces. He is said to have been defeated by the Turks with heavy loss; the figure of 5000 is mentioned. While this may not be accurate it betokens a substantial force. He needed it to hold the Danishmend at bay. It is widely argued that the old thematic armies had long perished in the chaos after 1071 but there must have been substantial troops about for his resistance, and later that of the Armenians and Andronicus in Cilicia, to persist. There are frequent references to

29 Medieval sources notoriously do not provide us with accurate figures for the size of armies or, indeed, with any figures at all, and historians tend to estimate out of necessity. This total of 30000 is given by Birkenmeier, *Komnenian army* 128–35, who further suggests, 151, that it was made up of 20000 Byzantine troops and 10000 allies – Hungarians, Serbians and crusaders from Antioch. Haldon, *Warfare, state and society in the Byzantine world*, 104 doubts that Manuel could have raised as many as 30000 for the expedition to Iconium in 1176, especially as he probably had no more than 60000 soldiers in the whole empire. However, this was clearly a very large force and the allies may have raised its numbers far beyond the norm.

30 J. France, *Western warfare in the age of the crusades 1000–1300* (London 1999) 221.

31 France, *Western warfare*, 128.

32 France, *Western warfare*, 129, 235; J.F. Verbruggen, *The art of warfare in western Europe during the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge 1997) 242–47 (trans. S. Willard and R.W. Southern of a 1954 Dutch original).

registers in the sources but the case is made that central government recruited and paid local levies without reference to any more immediate structure. Such forces were incorporated into the full-time forces replacing the native resistance which, it is argued, had so long held the Arabs at bay. In fact this strikes me as a very subtle distinction because there is no real proof that the thematic forces were soldier-farmers of a different kind.³³ Indeed, a recent work suggests that with much of the agricultural economy of Anatolia in decline, the whole basis of a localized resistance forces was vanishing and that Basil II and his successors had to change the army, increasing the proportion of mercenaries. This imposed very high costs and because of this Basil's successors pursued inconsistent policies.³⁴ This suggests that the local tripwire defence which had once existed had ceased to exist well before the Comnenian period. Thus the idea that the Komnenoi, forced to respond to Turkish attacks by throwing in regular central forces, were in a new situation is open to challenge, and we can argue that there was great continuity in military methods and institutions.

The registers enabled the emperors to collect willing forces but the main source was now the European provinces of the empire – a situation which would be replicated in the Ottoman empire in the later Middle Ages. The make-up of this army was certainly complex. In 1138 John Komnenos attacked Shaizar with an army divided between Macedonians, Kelts and Patzinaks, which is to say Romans, Latins and Turks.³⁵ In 1167 at Sirmion Manuel triumphed over the Hungarians with an army led by Cumans and Turks with a few western knights, followed by Roman forces, then infantry with bowmen and some well-equipped Turkish cavalry, then picked Roman, German and Turkish troops, backed up by a mixture of Latins and Serbs. Elsewhere we hear of Alans in 1155/6, 1177, 1185, 1189, Russians in 1160 and 1163, Hungarians at Myriokephalon in 1176; reference is made to a series of Latin peoples.³⁶ In 1121–22 John Komnenos sent his Varangians to attack the wagon laager which the Patzinaks had created as a base for their army and they literally hacked their way in with their great axes, enabling the Romans to triumph.³⁷ This is at least as motley a crowd as Romanos IV had assembled, or indeed Basil II before him. This was the nature of a paid army in an age long before any sense of nationalism in the modern sense existed. There was no reason why this army should not be effective. It is often overlooked how disparate western armies could be. William deployed French, Flemish, Bretons and Normans, a volatile mix of nations who had spent much time at one another's throats, in the Hastings campaign, while Henry II employed men from virtually every nation in Europe in his campaigns. The Byzantine army seems to have recruited its native troops from the western

³³ Birkenmeier, *Komnenian army*, 139–45.

³⁴ A. Peacock, *Early Seljuq history: a new interpretation* (London 2010) 128–64.

³⁵ Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 29; trans. Magoulias, 17.

³⁶ Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 148, 199, 218; trans. Brand, 115, 151, 165; Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 196, 361, 410; trans. Magoulias, 110, 200, 225.

³⁷ Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 7; trans. Brand, 16.

provinces, especially Thrace and Macedonia, in the form of levies whose names were recorded in the registers that are mentioned so frequently.

Byzantine armies were in fact very like western, crusader and even Muslim armies in that they were composites. No power could afford a large standing army which could meet all its likely needs, and so they maintained a core of troops around which others coalesced. In the case of the Byzantines, the Varangians and the guard units kept at Constantinople were the core, and to these were added the provincial levies. In 1175 in preparation for his campaign against Iconium Manuel went to Melangeia where he 'assembled an adequate force from the villages of Bithynia and Rhydakos'.³⁸ Such people were not necessarily the best of soldiers but this was a general condition of medieval warfare with which commanders and rulers had to cope and of which they seem to have been well aware. There were also military settlements like the Patzinaks defeated by John in 1122 and settled in the western provinces and the Serbs established by John Komnenos near Nicomedia.³⁹ The bulk of the army were cavalry. There are references to light horse, especially the Cuman, Patzinak and Turkish 'allies', while the bulk of the native forces seem to have been lancers wearing armour and capable of fighting at close quarters. However, they are differentiated from the Latin elements who represented a heavy cavalry in the proper sense of the word. Infantry were less important except for the Varangians who represented an elite. This was a force well suited to facing the empire's enemies and neighbours. The Danishmend and Iconian Turks were primarily light horse-archers, backed up by better-armed lancers. A fairly numerous corps of officers should have provided these forces with a command structure superior certainly to western armies.

It is difficult to estimate the logistics system of the Byzantine army. In 1153 in preparation for an expedition against the Hungarians Manuel ordered the western forces to bring wagons and food, much of which would be used to support the rest of the army which lacked both.⁴⁰ In 1150, in a campaign against the Serbs, there were unarmed troops who went out in front to forage, on this occasion bearing mattocks to dig up buried food. Certain cities and fortifications were regularly used as supply bases, notably Dorylaeum and Lopadaion in Anatolia.⁴¹ I must say I am impressed by the way in which the imperial government provided for the armies of the First and Second Crusades, with markets being summoned and ample food provided at imperial request.⁴² All this bespeaks an effective system of control and taxation which could be mobilized for military purposes and it certainly could deliver for, on the eve of the great expedition against Iconium in 1176, 3000 wagons were brought from Thrace with sufficient oxen to power them.⁴³ On the other hand this expedition, once it had

38 Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 294; trans. Brand, 220.

39 Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 16; trans. Magoulias, 11; Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 8; trans. Brand, 16.

40 Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 102; trans. Magoulias, 58.

41 Birkenmeier, *Komnenian army*, 175–7.

42 France, *Victory*, 106; J. France, 'Logistics and the Second Crusade', in J.H. Pryor (ed.), *Logistics of warfare in the age of the crusades* (Aldershot 2006) 77–94.

43 Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 299–300; trans. Brand, 224.

to cross the barren lands of inner Anatolia, quickly found itself short of food and water, especially as the Turks ravaged the land before Manuel. This seems to have had the effect of impelling Manuel on to Iconium with disastrous results.⁴⁴ In fact the Byzantine army quite often got into logistical problems once it moved outside its own territories and in this too it resembled almost all the other armies of the age.

The Byzantine army was very effective at siege operations. The art of fortification was well understood and the importance of cities like Kastamon and Gangra for anchoring the frontier is evident.⁴⁵ John Komnenos was able to terrify the Franks of Antioch into surrender in 1137 and in 1138 prosecuted a siege of Shaizar which, according to William of Tyre, was highly effective and failed only because of the lukewarm support of Raymond of Antioch and Jocelin of Edessa.⁴⁶ William is again complimentary of the Greeks who, he says, besieged Damietta in 1169 and fought well, although they were the subject of many attacks because the enemy thought them weaker than the Latins.⁴⁷ Birkenmeier points out that the Byzantines had all the most modern apparatus of siege and were moderately successful at this branch of warfare and I am inclined to agree with him in that. However, I think his assumption that they were specialists in the use of heavy trebuchets and exceeded all others in this is mistaken. The destruction of a Hungarian hoarding at Zeugminon in 1165 is interesting but hardly outstanding.⁴⁸ The Latins were practiced in siege warfare long before they went to the east, and the rapid seizure of the cities of the Palestinian littoral owed much to an evident mastery of this kind of war.⁴⁹ The Muslims had little to learn from them. In 1144 Zengi attacked Edessa with all the panoply of siege, mobile towers, catapults and mining and it fell within a month.⁵⁰ Saladin too proved to be an able orchestrator of sieges, in 1188 overrunning formidable Bourzey and capturing Sahyun with the aid of formidable machines.⁵¹ However, in field warfare the Byzantine record was hardly distinguished. In the Balkans they managed to hold off the Patzinaks but even after his victory in 1122 John Komnenos was not free of them and more steppe people, especially the Vlachs, returned to haunt his successors. He was markedly unsuccessful against the Hungarians. Manuel defeated them at Sirmion in 1166, but promptly withdrew, fearing that

⁴⁴ Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 179–80; trans. Magoulias, 101.

⁴⁵ Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 14–15; trans. Brand, 20–1.

⁴⁶ Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 18–19; trans. Brand, 23–4; William of Tyre, *Chronicon*, ed. R.B. C. Huygens, 2 vols., Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio mediaevalis 63, 63A (Turnhout 1986); *A History of Deeds done Beyond the Sea*, trans. E.A. Babcock and A.C. Krey, 2 vols (New York 1943) Book 15: chaps 1–2.

⁴⁷ William of Tyre 20:16.

⁴⁸ Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 133; trans. Magoulias, 76; Birkenmeier, *Komnenian army*, 182–205; see also E. McGeer, ‘Byzantine siege warfare in theory and practice’ in I.A. Corfis and M. Wolfe (eds), *The medieval city under siege* (Woodbridge 1999) 123–9 who discusses the middle Byzantine period and notes that the elaborate machinery of the Roman period was by then no longer in use.

⁴⁹ France, *Victory*, 163–5; R. Rogers, *Latin siege warfare in the twelfth century* (Oxford 1992) 64–90.

⁵⁰ M. Amouroux-Mourad, *Le comté d'Edesse 1098–1150* (Paris 1988) 85.

⁵¹ H. Kennedy, *Crusader castles* (Cambridge 1994) 79–84, 95–7.

German troops were coming to their aid, though he seems to have retained a degree of influence in their affairs.⁵² The Byzantines certainly knew all about retaining order on the march and used rearguards and vanguards to some effect, and they sought to protect their wings with light troops. They deployed horse-archers and protected their heavy cavalrymen. Yet victory in the field evaded them and they had little reputation as soldiers. Ibn al-Qalanisi was writing what we know as *The Damascus chronicle of the crusades* about the middle of the twelfth century and he records John Komnenos' attacks on Antioch and Shaizar but with little sense of fear and he deals rather similarly with Manuel's expedition in 1158.⁵³ For Ibn al-Athir the main importance of the wars of Manuel against Sicily was that the Sicilians had to abandon their conquests in Africa. Otherwise they are simply ignored. William of Tyre was a party to the negotiation of the accords between the Latin kingdom and Manuel and we have seen he is sometimes respectful of Greek fighting ability. Yet he remarks that Manuel preferred Latins to 'effeminate Greeks' — a common contemporary *topos* in Latin sources — and succeeded his father primarily because he enjoyed the support of the Latin troops in the army.⁵⁴ In 1150 Manuel demanded control of the rump of Edessa, but William tells us that the Latins thought he would not be able to defend it, and so it proved.⁵⁵ The kingdom continued to favour an alliance with Byzantium. In part, I suspect, this was because it was rather isolated and fairly desperate. The great value of the Byzantine alliance to Jerusalem was Manuel's fleet which enabled the Byzantines to project their power. William of Tyre clearly valued it, although he was sceptical of the worth of the Byzantine army. Choniates asserted that John Komnenos undermined the Byzantine fleet by preferring taxes from the people of the Cycladic islands to naval service. However, in 1169 Manuel managed to send 150 galleys, 60 horse-transports and 10–20 enormous *dromones* carrying supplies and engines of war to support the crusader attack on Egypt, and another fleet attacked Egypt in 1177 despite the failure of the Latins of Jerusalem, leaderless and dithering, to support it.⁵⁶ In fact the fiscalization of these rights may have simply been one of those exigencies to which all powers were prone at times. Famously Choniates denounced the new institution of *pronoia* which gave rise to a form of market in tax-farming but this was not confined to the Byzantine lands and, indeed, the *iqta* was not radically different. It is perhaps worth noting that the Ottoman *timar*, used to support the heavy cavalry, the *sipahis*, was very closely related to the *pronoia*. Choniates was a

⁵² Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 8, 9–12, 237–8; trans. Brand, 16, 17–19, 179. Bela III of Hungary (1172–96) served Manuel and took the Greek name Alexios. See Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 128, 137, 169–70; trans. Magoulias, 73, 78, 96. He was for a time the proposed heir of the emperor and ultimately married into the imperial family. After Manuel's death his relations with Byzantium were cooler and he married into French families, on which see W. Treadgold, *A concise history of Byzantium* (Basingstoke 2001) 177–80.

⁵³ Ibn al-Qalanisi, *The Damascus chronicle of the crusades* ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London 1932) 248–9, 349–53.

⁵⁴ William of Tyre 22:10, 15:23.

⁵⁵ William of Tyre 17:16–17.

⁵⁶ Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 55; trans. Magoulias, 32–3. William of Tyre 20:13, 21:17.

stickler for regularity and these ‘abuses’ seem to have been unacceptable to him. There is, however, no evidence that they interfered with military efficiency.⁵⁷ Byzantine failure is much more clearly related to quite different factors.

Like the Muslim rulers, the Byzantine emperors were not necessarily soldiers (though John and Manuel were) and they often relied on generals. As in the Muslim armies some of these men were professionals but others were noble, such as Michael Palaiologos and John Doukas to whom Manuel entrusted the Apulian campaign, 1155–56, or even relatives like Andronikos Kontostephanos who commanded at Sirmion.⁵⁸ Saladin depended on notables like Keukburi over whom he had limited control, while at Hattin king Guy had little option but to give a prominent part to Raymond of Tripoli whom he flatly hated.⁵⁹ In the west kings simply had no option but to rely on the magnates, often called princes because of their power and position.⁶⁰ What welded an army together was the personality of its commander, and in this the Byzantine army was no different from its neighbours in the Middle East. It is no accident that this army performed relatively well under John and Manuel Komnenos, and poorly under their immediate successors. Even then Branas could inspire victory over the attacking Sicilians in 1185.⁶¹

In one respect, however, there was a crucial difference between Byzantine armies and those of the Latin states and western powers in general. The emperor controlled an immense tax-based structure of government, and while nobles usually held some land, their power and position essentially depended on acquiring imperial patronage. The situation was similar in the states of the Islamic world which also were based on tax-collecting bureaucracies. In theory this should have given the emperor the whip-hand and produced officers competing for his favour in a disciplined pyramid of power. In practice because the Komnenoi welded the upper aristocracy together by marriage in a kind of family condominium it was easy for rivalries to get out of hand. Manuel was endlessly indulgent to the rebellious and treacherous Andronikos and generally reluctant to proceed harshly against other members of the imperial family.⁶² The bitter competition between these families was much removed from military reality because they had little land in exposed areas. After Manzikert in 1071 the great families had happily given away Anatolia in which few of them had vital interests.⁶³ By contrast the Turks, from their very first appearance, seem to have found the plateau of Anatolia a congenial environment that they were determined to own.⁶⁴ Manuel was strong enough to

⁵⁷ Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 204; trans. Magoulias, 115–16.

⁵⁸ Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 136; trans. Brand, 107.

⁵⁹ Lyons and Jackson, *Saladin*, 256; France, *Western warfare*, 221–3.

⁶⁰ France, *Western warfare*, 139–49.

⁶¹ Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 358–64; trans. Magoulias, 198–201.

⁶² Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 225–8; trans. Magoulias, 128–9.

⁶³ S. Vryonis, *The decline of medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the process of Islamization from the eleventh through the fifteenth century* (Berkeley 1971) 70–142.

⁶⁴ Peacock, *Early Seljuq history*, 128–64.

control this rootless and faction-ridden aristocracy but when he died the ferocious competition got out of hand in much the same way as had happened after Manzikert and imperial control outside the capital weakened gravely. Alexios I, John II and Manuel I and their armies were the essence of the Byzantine state and they could count on little help from anyone else. Western rulers could at least reckon on the vested interest of at least some of the leading landowners in their territories.⁶⁵

This placed an enormous burden on the military organization of the state and on the person of the emperor and his military competence. It is undoubtedly true that Byzantium was distracted by many enemies, yet the acid-test of failure was Anatolia. The need to counter enemies east and west certainly made a focus on this area difficult but it is the common thread running through the reigns of Alexios, John and Manuel, for Iconium, and to a lesser extent the Danishmend lands, were the real acid-test of Byzantine power. The high plateau of Anatolia was not particularly rich, and it was quite likely much poorer than it had been in the middle Byzantine period. There were pockets of good land, and it lay across trade-routes. More importantly, whoever controlled it could dominate the richer coastlands and would automatically become a serious player in the affairs of Syria. This was why all the Comnenian emperors made serious attacks upon it, culminating in Manuel's assault of 1176. Alexios tried in 1116 while John sought to exploit divisions between Iconium and the Danishmends and captured key fortresses in 1132–35. After his campaign to Antioch he tried to seize Neocaesarea (Niksar) and in 1142 extended his power to Lake Pousgouse (Beyşehir Gölü) before his final expedition to Cilicia and Antioch on which he died.⁶⁶ Manuel seems to have attacked the Turks recovering Melangeia en route to Antioch in 1144. In 1142 he fortified outposts in Anatolia east of Nicaea while in 1146 he prepared a great expedition which seized Philomelion and ended with inconclusive fighting around Iconium.⁶⁷ Ultimately the coming of the Second Crusade led to peace. After a long interlude during which he sent a major expedition to Sicily, in 1159 Manuel resumed his military activity in Anatolia culminating in the gathering of a great army in 1160 to which came troops from Antioch and Jerusalem and numerous foreign contingents. This forced Iconium to a peace⁶⁸ which lasted until 1173 when Nur ad-Din and the Armenians of Cilicia joined Iconium in an attack on the imperial lands, forcing Manuel to build fortifications. By 1175 Manuel was gathering another great army and with this he attacked Iconium in 1176 clearly bent on capturing the city and fatally weakening the Turkish power, only to be defeated at Myriokephalon.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ M. Whittow, 'How the East was lost: the background to the Komnenian *reconquista*', in Mullett and Smythe (eds), *Alexios I Komnenos*, 55–67.

⁶⁶ Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 5–8, 14–15, , 21, 22; trans. Brand, 14–16, 20–1, 25, 26.

⁶⁷ Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 53; trans. Magoulias, 31: Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 36–67; trans. Brand, 36–58.

⁶⁸ Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 191–202; trans. Brand, 145–53.

⁶⁹ Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 291–300; trans. Brand, 218–24; Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 175–97; trans. Magoulias, 99–111.

No other neighbour was the target of such enormous military effort by the emperors. The defeat in 1176 was not a military disaster. It certainly did not spring from a lack of assets for an army of 30000 with a vast siege-train was obviously a dire menace. The patient building of fortresses in Anatolia would have been a better preparation for the campaign but that was probably impossible in view of the various other commitments. Amongst these the quarrels with Sicily and Barbarossa were perhaps the most gratuitous, along with support for the Latin kingdom. Yet Hungary and Serbia were vital interests absorbing much activity and great resources. Even so the army of 1176 was powerful but Manuel seems to have planned badly. He was a bold and energetic soldier but on this occasion tried to fight in very adverse circumstances for which he seems to have prepared badly. He suffered something of a breakdown during the battle. It was upon such chance events that success or failure turned. Myriokephalon was decisive because, shortly after, the death of Manuel removed the essential force which made the body politic work and the army effective. In a sense Myriokephalon was a random event but this defeat meant that Byzantium remained only a strong regional power and failed in its attempt to break out of this strait-jacket. The reign of Andronikos blew apart the Comnenian system of government and the dynasty of the Angeloi proved incompetent soldiers. These internal failures provoked the attack of the Fourth Crusade upon Constantinople when the Byzantine military machine decisively failed its ultimate test.

But even before the Fourth Crusade there was Frederick Barbarossa. His army started out 15000 strong, of which at least 3000 were knights with probably another 6000 squires or grooms, many of whom would have been capable of fighting on horseback. The rest of the army would have been foot-soldiers (some perhaps with horses) and servants.⁷⁰ The Byzantine army recoiled before this host and ultimately paid a considerable tribute, 400 pounds of silver, despite having suffered considerable ravaging of the countryside during the period of tension.⁷¹ Once into Anatolia the Germans crushed the army of Iconium at Philomelion and went on to seize the city itself before concluding a truce with the sultan which allowed them free passage. The contrast with Manuel's failure in 1176, despite having a much bigger army, is striking. The Fourth Crusade offers an even more dramatic contrast. The fundamental reason for the success of the initial crusader assault on the city on 17 July 1203 was naval – the absence of a Byzantine fleet permitted the fall of the Galata tower and the flying bridges with which the Venetians proceeded to assault the wall along the Golden Horn were difficult to combat without ships. But when the Venetians seized part of the wall and the city there burned, the emperor Alexios Angelos mounted a sally against the crusader army outside the land walls with some 30,000 troops. This force completely failed to attack the crusader army which could not have numbered more than 10,000, including fewer

⁷⁰ E. Eickhoff, *Friederich Barbarossa: Kreuzzug und Tod Friederichs I* (Tübingen 1977) 47, 77. For the sources on this expedition see G.A. Loud, *The crusade of Frederick Barbarossa. The history of the expedition of the emperor Frederick and related texts* (Aldershot 2010).

⁷¹ Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 411–12; trans. Magoulias, 226.

than 5000 knights.⁷² In the final assault on the city the army was augmented by numerous westerners who had fought for the empire on the previous occasion but had fled from the city before the attack on foreigners.⁷³ In this final attack on 12 April 1204 the western army barely established a toehold when a sudden panic seized the defenders who fled, permitting the crusaders to take the city.⁷⁴ It has been suggested that the defenders were reluctant to fight for a usurper, Alexios Doukas Mourtzouphlos, especially as he was merely the latest in a line of usurpers, but this fits ill with the clear perception of the people of Constantinople that the crusaders were an alien people, a feeling expressed in savage attacks even against Pisans and Genoese who had fought for them in the first siege. Mourtzouphlos seems to have been a determined soldier who had gone to considerable trouble to strengthen the defences, but he came after a period of acute dithering at the court, and after some 20 years of fairly incompetent emperors. Even so there was still a large army in this great city.

In these circumstances it is hard not to reflect on issues of motivation. As the crusaders assaulted the walls of Constantinople their battle-cry was 'Holy Sepulchre'. We hear of nothing on the Greek side comparable in its unifying effect. It is not difficult to show that the Turks of Anatolia were led by cynical politicians who were as prepared to do a deal with the Greeks as to proclaim *jihad* but that remained a reserve position. At the time of the First Crusade the nomads of Rum had cried *Allah akbar* as they charged against the crusaders. But perhaps here I can also return to Alexios' appeal for help to the West in 1094/5 which provoked the whole crusading movement. He had plenty of soldiers, but what he most likely wanted was western knights. Now there is a myth of the knight which modern historians have done their best to debunk.⁷⁵ Such debunking can, however, be taken too far. The fact of the matter is that while missile weapons could be very useful, and in the hands of the Turks the composite bow was deadly and hard-hitting, it was usually vital to come to close-quarters to win. Commenting on the crusader

72 The very large number for the Byzantine force is the result of a careful analysis by D.E. Queller and T. F. Madden (*The Fourth Crusade* (Philadelphia 1997) 125 and n. 42) of the versions of the confrontation given in the personal accounts of two members of the Latin army who were actually present, Robert of Clari and Geoffrey de Villehardoun. See Robert of Clari, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed. P. Lauer (Paris 1924) 45–6, trans. E.H. McNeal (New York 1948) 70–6; Geoffrey de Villehardouin, *La conquête de Constantinople*, ed. E. Faral, 2 vols. (Paris 1938–1939) 2:39–40, trans. M.R.B. Shaw [Harmondsworth 1963] 72–3. The count of St Pol, who distinguished himself in the confrontation, left a stirring account in a letter to the west. See R. Pokorny, 'Zwei unedizierte Briefe aus der Frühzeit des Lateinischen Kaiserreichs von Konstantinopel', *B* 55 (1985) 203–9.

73 Gunther of Pairis, *The capture of Constantinople* ed. A. J. Andrea (Philadelphia 1997) 107.

74 Robert of Clari, 98; Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 568–9; trans. Magoulias, 312.

75 M. Bennett, 'The myth of the supremacy of knightly cavalry', in M. J. Strickland (ed.), *Armies, chivalry and warfare* (Stamford 1998) 159–70; B.D. Lyon, 'The role of cavalry in medieval warfare: horses, horses all around and not a one to use', *Academiae Analecta, Klasse der Letteren, Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België*, XIX (1987) 77–90; S. Morillo, 'The "age of cavalry" revisited', in D.J. Kagay and L.J.A. Villalon (eds), *The circle of war in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge 1999) 45–59.

victory at the battle of Dorylaeum on 1 July 1097, an anonymous participant remarked that the Turks ‘thought they would strike terror into the Franks, as they had done into the Arabs and Saracens, Armenians, Syrians and Greeks by the menace of their arrows.’⁷⁶ At close quarters the western knight was well protected and well armed and his training suited him for this cut and thrust. They were not infallible and were often very badly handled and vulnerable to the tactics of the light cavalry. This was clearly demonstrated at Hattin and was again apparent at Adrianople very shortly after the capture of Constantinople when the Latin emperor Baldwin was himself captured by Iohannitsa of Bulgaria.⁷⁷ But western knights remained in high demand because of their fighting ability at close-quarters. The Turks who contested dominion over the Levant with the crusaders took a long time to come to terms with their fighting methods. They certainly never abandoned their waves of horse-archers but they increased the heavy equipment of the *ghulams*, to whom the Turkmen became essentially ancillary, and the Mongols later also used a similar combination of light horse and heavier lancers.⁷⁸ This adaptation to the western style was also, according to Kinnamos, attempted by Manuel Komnenos, and, interestingly, al-Tartusi says that the Byzantines had adopted the long pointed shield used by the Franks.⁷⁹ But what is notable throughout their works is the prominence that both Kinnamos and Choniates accord to the Latin soldiers in the Byzantine ranks.⁸⁰ Just before the final attack on Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade, Henry of Flanders led a foraging expedition that Mourzouphlos ambushed. However, the Greeks, despite the advantage of surprise, were soon put to flight.⁸¹ In fact Kinnamos notes that in preparation for his campaign of 1160–61 against Iconium Manuel recruited Latins from Rhodes which seems to have functioned as a mercenary park, while after 1176 Choniates says Manuel felt he could pay off the easterners, but feared the west.⁸²

Byzantium in the age of the Komnenoi was a formidable power which could, like most substantial states of the twelfth century, produce a large and well equipped army on occasion. The empire could produce competent logistical support for soldiers on its

76 Anonymous, *Gesta Francorum et aliorum Hierosolimitanorum*, ed. R. Hill (London and New York 1962) 21.

77 Henry of Flanders, *Epistola* ed. R. Pokorný, B 55 (1985) 199–202; R. Mitchell, ‘Light cavalry, heavy cavalry, horse archers, Oh My! What abstract definitions don’t tell us about 1205 Adrianople’, *Journal of Medieval Military History* 6 (2008) 95–118; similar tactics are evident in the thirteenth century on which see N.S. Kanellopoulos and J.K. Lekea, ‘The struggle between the Nicaean empire and the Bulgarian state (1254–56): towards a revival of Byzantine military tactics under Theodore II Laskaris’, *Journal of Medieval Military History* 5 (2007) 56–69.

78 C. Cahen, ‘Un traité d’armurerie compose pour Saladin’, *Bulletin d’études orientales de l’Institut français de Damas* 12 (1947/8) 103–63.

79 Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 125; trans. Brand, 99; Cahen, ‘Un Traité’, 137.

80 Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 9–12, 136, 187–8; trans. Brand, 17–19, 107, 143; Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 223–5, 371–2, 532, 563; trans. Magoulias, 127–32, 205, 292, 308.

81 Robert of Clari, 88–90.

82 Kinnamos, ed. Meineke, 271–4; trans. Brand, 203–5; Choniates, ed. van Dieten, 199–200; trans. Magoulias, 113.

own territory, though, like almost all powers, it struggled beyond its frontiers. Its forces were diverse, and this was appropriate for the range of enemies it faced. They were just as dependent upon the personality of their commanders as all armies were in this age. In a structural sense there was little to distinguish Byzantine armies from those of their neighbours and particularly the crusaders and the Muslims. The Byzantines, especially under Manuel Komnenos, were often distracted by concerns with many theatres of war but this was true of all powers, and, even so, substantial armies could be brought to bear when need demanded, as in the campaign of Myriokephalon.

But crusaders and Muslims could reinforce their armies by a powerful sense of religious enthusiasm, and this was certainly very important in the Fourth Crusade whose leaders were divided and uncertain. Byzantine armies, which could often display fine discipline as at Myriokephalon, simply lacked this dimension. Moreover, their aristocracy lacked a real sense of connection with the land, and this seems to have been particularly important in the failure to establish a proper frontier with Iconium and the Danishmends, because the Turks were determined to hang on to fine pastures ideally suited to their nomadic way of life. What the Byzantine army lacked was inspiration which could count for a great deal in particular circumstances, and, perhaps more importantly, commanders who were attached to the land and rooted in it. It is for this reason perhaps that they never broke Iconium and therefore the barrier between being a strong power and a great one.